

**Globalization, Creative Alliance and Self-Orientalism:  
Negotiating Japanese Identity within Asics Global Advertising Production**

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Kobayashi, K., Jackson, S.J. & Sam, M.P. (2017). Globalization, Creative Alliance and Self-Orientalism: Negotiating Japanese Identity Within Asics Global Advertising Production. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. DOI: 10.1177/1367877917733812

The above article is available at

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1367877917733812>

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## **Abstract**

This paper deploys the notion of ‘self-Orientalization’ (Dirlik, 1996; Iwabuchi, 1994) to empirically investigate the signifying practices across the East-West divide for the construction of global advertising campaigns by Japanese sport brand, Asics. In this context, Asics engaged in the practice of self-Orientalization as it formed a creative alliance with Western advertising agencies that represented Japanese culture and identity on behalf of the Japanese-based global headquarters. With insights from interviews with key advertising personnel, the paper illuminates practices of negotiation and accommodation between Japanese and European creative workers in shaping ‘authentic’ and ‘cool’ signs of Japan. Overall, it suggests that self-Orientalization: (a) entails negotiations over the cultural-economic politics of representation between the Orient and the Occident and, (b) simultaneously functions to blur such distinctions at the micro-level of social relations and personal identification of creative workers when embodying and performing the Other on behalf of the Self.

## **Key words**

globalization; self-Orientalism; Japanese culture and identity; cultural production; advertising; sport brand

Globalization has been a major force in altering the world’s cultural landscapes and destabilizing the imagined division of the East and the West. Given the impact of neo-liberal restructuring of the global economy and markets, transnational corporations (TNCs) emerged as “the key shapers and shakers” (Morley and Robins, 1995: 109) in the production and mediation of commodities and signs. One general perspective on the globalization of TNCs considers that global information and cultural goods—predominantly shaped by ‘Western’<sup>1</sup> (or more specifically American) media and consumer culture—have served as potent vehicles of the Western view of morals, histories and knowledge—or what Edward Said (1978) famously conceptualized as ‘Orientalism’. According to the discourse of Orientalism, non-Western societies like Japan have been represented as ‘the Other’ and, in turn, stereotyped as “irrational, aberrant, backward, crude, despotic, inferior, inauthentic, passive, feminine and sexually corrupt” (Macfie, 2000: 4). However, while Said’s critique of Orientalism has been regarded as highly valuable for problematizing the Western narrative of ‘world history’ as a universal referent point, his work has also been challenged in several ways

(e.g., Iwabuchi, 2002; Macfie, 2000; Turner, 1994; Varisco, 2007; Young, 1995). One of the problems in Said's critique, which serves as the departure point for this paper, is his re-articulation of a complete binary between the East and the West with a fixed, one-way power relation. As such, building on the concepts of self-Orientalism and self-Orientalization, this paper argues that the emergence of creative alliance between non-Western TNCs and Western advertising agencies has enabled non-Western TNCs to appropriate Orientalism in a way that destabilizes Western hegemony, thereby rendering East-West power relations much more fluid, interpenetrative and elastic.

More specifically, this paper focuses on a case study of the global advertising campaign, *Made of Japan*, for Asics' sub-brand Onitsuka Tiger. The campaign was found to be particularly suitable for studies of (self-)Orientalism as it is a Japanese TNC representing its 'country-of-origin' popular culture as part of its promotional strategy on a global scale. While the practices of self-representation could be framed as 'counter-Orientalism' (Moeran, 1996b) in a way that challenges stereotypes with authenticity, the investigation further identified that the series of advertising campaigns were actually planned and developed by a European subsidiary and advertising agency as opposed to the Japanese-based global headquarters. Thus, we contend that this mode of creative alliance, between Japanese TNCs and Western subsidiaries/advertising agencies, is best framed as 'self-Orientalization' through which a Japanese TNC accommodates, albeit through negotiation, European representations of Japanese authenticity and coolness as "the spectacle of the 'Other'" (Hall, 1997: 225). Moreover, drawing upon interviews with key advertising personnel involved in production, the paper reveals micro-level complexities of negotiation and multiple personal identifications that occurred during the creative processes. Given that the mode of creative alliance between Eastern TNCs and Western advertising agencies has been adopted more widely by East Asian TNCs,<sup>2</sup> self-Orientalism is considered to be both prevalent and prominent within the global

advertising industry. As a consequence, it is likely to have a significant impact on the blurring of East-West boundaries and the destabilization of Western hegemony—in a manner that is more transparent and intense compared to the context in which Said originally theorized Orientalism.

The paper begins by outlining different forms of Orientalism in advertising and then explains how various modes of creative alliance are associated with different processes of Orientalization. Following this, analysis of the case study is divided into three main sections: (a) the context of branding Onitsuka Tiger; (b) Onitsuka Tiger's resistance towards Orientalism; and, (c) ambivalence in European creative workers' representations of Japan. Finally, the conclusion highlights the significance of the findings and offers potential areas for future research.

### **Varieties of Orientalism in Advertising**

Given the dominance of Western, and specifically American, media and consumer culture, one may not have any difficulty in finding examples of Orientalism within global media, including advertising (Leiss et al., 2005; O'Barr, 1994). In particular, several scholars have applied the understanding of Orientalism to the ways in which Japanese traditional symbols and images are incorporated as signs of exoticism within Western media (Daliot-Bul, 2007; Kogure, 2008; Moeran, 1996b; Morley and Robins, 1995). For instance, Moeran (1996b) acknowledges the proliferation of the Orientalist representations of Japan associated with *sumō* wrestlers, *geisha*, Mount Fuji and tea ceremonies in Western advertising. To be clear, the use of foreign traditional symbols itself is not inherently problematic when it clearly shows a high degree of understanding of, and respect for, traditional culture and sensibility. Rather, what needs to be scrutinised and challenged are the ways in which such representations of Japan are reduced to producing *distorted* and *offensive* images and meanings, or 'stereotypes',

which are often caused by a lack of effort in understanding ‘the Other’—that is, what we may call ‘Orientalist’ (Hall, 1997).<sup>3</sup>

Although Japan has long been represented as an exotic and mythical Other located in the ‘Far East’ since Marco Polo’s fourteenth century book, the Western imaginaries of Japan were significantly transformed during the twentieth century when Japan emerged as the first modern nation from the Orient. In this regard, Moeran (1996b) discusses the notion of ‘counter-Orientalism’ through which Japanese TNCs assert possibilities of self-representation in challenging Orientalist discourses within the Western media. As Moeran (1996b) argues, “far from allowing themselves to remain subordinate to Western hegemony in the Orientalist discourse, the Japanese have actively involved themselves in propagating an ethno- or counter-Orientalism, in which they have taken many of the negative qualities assigned to Oriental peoples by Orientalists and converted them into positive evaluations of their own society and culture” (106). From this counter-hegemonic view, counter-Orientalist practices of Japanese TNCs can be considered as a strategic attempt at “trans-coding” (Hall, 1997: 270) to replace negative representations of ‘exotic and mythical Japan’ with positive representations of ‘cool and techno-futurist Japan’ (Moeran, 1996b; also see Daliot-Bul, 2007). However, an emphasis on Japan’s economic and technological equivalence to, or even superiority over, many Western nations has also been interpreted by Morley and Robins (1995: 154) as producing a discourse of ‘techno-Orientalism’ through which the Japanese are turned into inanimate objects such as ‘robots’, ‘workaholics’ and ‘economic animals’.<sup>4</sup>

## **Creative Alliance between the East and the West: Counter-Orientalization or Self-Orientalization?**

The problem of Orientalism is often associated with a lack of self-representation or voice from the Orient itself (Hall, 1997; Macfie, 2000; Said, 1978; Young, 1995). Within the global advertising industry, this problem is often manifested when Western TNCs and advertising agencies appropriate ‘exotic’ and ‘mythic’ images of the Orient to promote their brands and products (Leiss et al., 2005; Moeran, 1996b). While Moeran (1996b) recognizes the economic rise of the East and its associated power in self-representation, in the real world of the global advertising industry, Japanese TNCs have frequently hired Western advertising agencies to produce and distribute marketing and advertising campaigns both in Western markets and at the global level. Thus, Japanese TNCs’ use of Western advertising agencies to represent Japanese authentic culture and identity poses an important question regarding self-representation. In contrast to American advertising agencies which went hand in hand with American TNCs when globalizing their markets, the giants of Japanese advertising agencies such as Dentsu and Hakuhodo often faced communication barriers deriving from the particularity of Japanese language and business orientations. As a result, they tended to focus on the domestic market. This, in turn, required Japanese TNCs to partner with Western advertising agencies as a necessary part of their globalization strategy (Johansson and Nonaka, 1996; Kobayashi, 2016; Takada, Mizuno and Bith-Hong, 2012). At the same time, the creative alliance with Western advertising agencies has been recognized as a key aspect of the ‘glocalization’ (Robertson, 1995) strategy for Japanese TNCs to meet local tastes and needs by customizing their products and services in the Western markets (Kobayashi, 2012, 2016). Nevertheless, when Japanese TNCs, in partnership with Western advertising agencies, opt to represent their country-of-origin culture and identity, the resultant practice and process are more likely informed by self-

Orientalization than by glocalization. Table 1 indicates the relationships between the modes of creative alliance with dominant structural tendencies of glocalization and Orientalization.

**Table 1: Modes of creative alliance and dominant structural tendencies when representing Japanese culture and identity**

TNCs	Ad agencies	Who represents	Who is represented	Target markets	Dominant structural tendencies
Western	Western	West/Other	Japan/Self	West	Orientalization
	Japanese	Japan/Self	Japan/Self	Japan	Glocalization
Japanese	Western	West/Other	Japan/Self	West	Self-Orientalization
	Japanese	Japan/Self	Japan/Self	West	Counter-Orientalization

We acknowledge that these modes, and their dominant structural tendencies, are not universally generalizable as self-representation (or lack thereof) and can be further complicated by, for instance, Japanese creatives working at a Western advertising agency or Japanese marketers working at a Western TNC. Nevertheless, at least at an inter-organizational level, the process of self-Orientalization within the global advertising industry can be characterized by Western advertising agencies playing a central role in representing Japanese culture and identity on behalf of Japanese corporations. While they have more recently been applied across a variety of disciplines (e.g., Mitchell, 2004; Yan and Santos, 2009), self-Orientalism and self-Orientalization have generally been under-theorized. Thus, we have drawn on the limited, but key, conceptualizations offered by Dirlik (1996) and Iwabuchi (1994).

Self-Orientalism refers to the wilful (re-)action of non-Western individuals and institutions to ‘play the Other’—that is, Western portrayals of the non-West—in order to strategically gain recognition and position themselves within the Western-dominated global economy, system and order.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to counter-Orientalism, self-Orientalism involves a certain degree of suppression of self-representation in accepting and

performing the West's stereotyping. In the words of Schäfer (2009), it is the East's attempt to re-construct its own subjectivity and identity "under the 'gaze' of 'the West' as an answer to [the] process of 'objectivization'" (31). As such, self-Orientalism has a dialectic function of complimenting and countering Western hegemony. On the one hand, as Iwabuchi (1994) asserts, self-Orientalism should not be regarded as "a passive strategy of the inferior" because it asserts the Orient itself within a dominant discourse through appropriation of the West's stereotyping or "active exploitation of 'the West'" (52). In this sense, many Japanese TNCs have successfully positioned themselves on the 'winner's side' within the global economy by adapting to Western capitalism and appropriating Orientalism.

On the other hand, Iwabuchi (1994) acknowledges the limits of Japanese self-Orientalism as follows:

it would be also misleading to see Japanese self-Orientalism as a serious challenge to western Orientalism. On the contrary, the relationship between the West's Orientalist discourse on Japan and Japan's discourse on itself is characterised by a profound complicity. Both tend to use the Other to essentialise the Self and to repress the heterogeneous voices within. (52)

This 'profound complicity' is perhaps most evident in the aforementioned interplay between techno-Orientalism and techno-nationalism. Thus, self-Orientalism has a side closely linked with cultural nationalism that obscures the ethnic and cultural differences within an essentialist discourse of Japanese homogeneity (Dirlik, 1996; Kogure, 2008).

Another important function of self-Orientalism, as pointed out by Dirlik (1996), is that it creates confusion between subject/Self and object/Other:

...in the very process of understanding an alien culture, orientalists need in some measure to be "orientalised," if you like, which brings orientalists closer to the Other while distancing them from the society of the Self. If only as specialist or expert, the orientalist comes not just to speak about but also *for* the Other. ...the distinctions between self and other, or subject and object, crucial to the analysis of orientalism, become blurred though not necessarily abolished. (101, emphasis in original)



It is in this sense that there is a need to take account of the flexible and fluid nature of cultural identity. As Hall (1992) insists:

...rather than speaking of identity as a finished thing, we should speak of *identification*, and see it as an on-going process. Identity arises, not so much from the fullness of identity which is already inside us as individuals, but from a *lack* of wholeness which is 'filled' from *outside us*, by the ways we imagine ourselves to be seen by *others*. (287, emphasis in original)

Thus, in order to address the question of representation in self-Orientalism, micro-level social relations and personal identification through self-Orientalization need to be carefully analysed by considering forms of hybridity, negotiation and accommodation that cut across the imaginary division of the East and the West.

### **Methodology and Methods**

Located within a larger project on advertising production and signifying practices by global sport brands, this study was designed to understand the production of a particular advertising campaign and the range of perspectives from the creative workers involved in it. More broadly, such conditions of production and the perspectives of the workers are located and framed by the 'circuit of culture' (du Gay et al., 1997; Johnson, 1986; Johnson et al., 2004). Within this framework, du Gay et al. (1997) demonstrated the ways in which a particular 'cultural artefact', in their case the Sony Walkman, was produced, represented and consumed through different stages of the circuit while being encoded or decoded by a variety of actors involved in the creation of symbolic meanings and associations. Likewise, an advertisement can be considered as a 'cultural artefact' which is then analyzed to understand meanings, ideologies and values associated with production and consumption.

For this study, the context of Asics advertising production was examined firstly by collecting relevant materials online including Asics' campaign websites, the advertising agencies' press releases and advertising industry popular outlets (e.g.,

magazines and journals). This information was then used to identify the key organizations and actors involved in the production of the particular campaign. After the initial search for background information about its production, a set of interviews was proposed to Asics Headquarters. This proposal outlined our intention to carry out interviews across the multiple organizations involved in the production of the *Made of Japan* campaigns including: Asics Headquarters, Asics Europe, Amsterdam Worldwide and PandaPanther (production company). Following the approval, the first author was invited to have an interview at Asics Headquarters in Kobe, Japan. This interview was conducted in Japanese and then translated into English. This was then followed by the interviews with European partners in Amsterdam and PandaPanther in New York. These interviews were conducted in English.

In total, seven interviewees participated in this study. All the interviews were conducted at their workplaces, digitally recorded and fully transcribed with the transcriptions being returned to the interviewees to check for accuracy. Fortunately, all the interviews lasted longer than planned—about two hours—which contributed to the quality and richness of the data. The analysis below draws mainly on the interviews conducted with the Marketing Manager at Asics Headquarters in Japan, the Communication Manager at Asics Europe, and the Creative Director at Amsterdam Worldwide as they were centrally positioned for the formulation and development of advertising strategies and concepts for the *Made of Japan* campaigns. All the interviews were eventually coded by themes including: ‘self-Orientalism’, ‘negotiation of Japanese identity’ and ‘branding of Onitsuka Tiger’ (Creswell, 2009). Consequently, the methods allowed us to examine both: (a) the representations of Japanese culture and identity within the advertisements; and, (b) the conditions of production under which the advertising professionals were directly responsible for the different stages of production in Europe and Japan.<sup>6</sup>

## **Case Study: Negotiating Japanese Identity Within Asics Global Advertising**

### **Production**

#### *Context of branding Onitsuka Tiger*

Onitsuka Tiger was originally established by Kihachiro Onitsuka, the founder of Onitsuka Corporation, as an athletic shoe brand in 1949 in Kobe, Japan. When Onitsuka Corporation was rebranded as Asics Corporation in 1977, the Onitsuka Tiger brand was subsumed under the uniform brand of Asics. Thus, Onitsuka Tiger had been dormant until it was ‘re-discovered’ by European fashion leaders, brokers and consumers around the beginning of the twentieth first century. There were two key developments in Europe that eventually led to the revival of the Onitsuka Tiger brand: fashion booms of ‘retro sneakers’ and ‘cool Japan’ (Condry, 2009; Iwabuchi, 2008). Specifically, the retro fashion trends coincided with the rising popularity of Japanese popular culture, collectively offering a rare opportunity for Asics to re-produce the original models of Onitsuka Tiger sneakers in the fashion-conscious markets of Europe. Subsequently, Onitsuka Tiger was officially re-established as a lifestyle brand in 2002 (Kobayashi et al., 2010). A key moment for the burst of Onitsuka Tiger’s popularity came from Hollywood in 2003 when the Quentin Tarantino-directed movie *Kill Bill* featured the main character wearing iconic Onitsuka Tiger sneakers. It is for this reason that one of the Onitsuka Tiger branding team publicly stated that the brand was “Japanese-born and European-raised” (Reco Orland, 2009).

The initial response to the surge in the trends of retro sneakers and Japanese popular culture was for the American and European subsidiaries of Asics to initiate their own marketing communication strategies. The Marketing Manager (MM) at Asics Headquarters explains:

For Onitsuka Tiger, its revival was first triggered by the fashion buyers and stores who wanted to revive the old models of our shoes and sell them as fashion items in the U.S.A. and Europe... It all started with the [wholesale and retail] buyers who wanted to sell them. It was not

intentionally coordinated by Asics but driven by the market demands... As a result, the consumer demands were so overwhelming that each of our subsidiaries responded on its own for the respective market. So, the Japanese headquarters, which is supposed to lead the rest of the group, was left behind while the American and European subsidiaries achieved successful outcomes. (personal communication, 18 February 2010)

At the time, these subsidiaries undertook, or were allowed to undertake, their own productions of advertising and marketing of Onitsuka Tiger using elements of Japanese popular culture *without* consent or approval from the Japanese headquarters. The images of Japan featured in their advertisements included *samurai*, *sushi* and *bonsai* that were, in the words of the MM, a “rather ‘strange Japan’ from the perspective of Japanese eyes although it was produced by a Japanese company” (personal communication, 18 February 2010). From the viewpoint of Orientalism, the American and European subsidiaries’ use of ‘cool Japan’, allegedly promoting positive images of Japan within the Western media, may be problematic given that the signifying practices were nonetheless motivated and derived from the Western desire to consume ‘Japan’ as “the spectacle of the ‘Other’” (Hall, 1997: 225).

There were two major dilemmas for Asics Headquarters. First, while the Japanese headquarters was in a legitimate position to promote the authenticity of the ‘Japanese’ brand, its messages had to be translated by Asics Europe and its advertising agency Amsterdam Worldwide who were positioned geographically and culturally closer to communicate with Western consumers. The MM at Asics Headquarters lamented the reality that large-scale Japanese corporations and advertising agencies (e.g. over 1000 employees) were outperformed by small-scale Western advertising agencies like Amsterdam Worldwide (about 30 employees) with respect to constructing global-level advertising campaigns largely due to the dominance of English as the *de facto* global language:

I think the reason why a group of 30 people can do the job is that their official language of work is English given that the agency is located in Europe with its workers from 13 different nations. It’s in the Netherlands,

but everything including internal documents at the agency is conducted in English... In Japan, everything is conducted in Japanese. It takes more than twice as long just to translate English into Japanese and vice versa... So, we are facing a big hurdle to overcome. It is very difficult for us and Japanese advertising agencies to manage global advertising and marketing. (personal communication, 18 February 2010)

Second, the Japanese headquarters was challenged by its Western subsidiaries for its legitimacy to take a leading role in marketing and branding within the inter-organizational dynamics of cultural-economic power relations. Given that Asics' overseas sales have outgrown its domestic sales since 2003, the overseas subsidiaries have been able to enhance their voices within the Asics group with respect to global operations and branding. In the words of the General Manager of Marketing at Asics Headquarters, "we realised that Japan (the headquarters) was no longer able to sustain substantial leadership and shifted our strategy to prioritise branding for managerial efficiency and effectiveness" (personal communication, 18 February 2010). In particular, Asics Headquarters was pressured by the Western subsidiaries to shift its strategic focus to branding and marketing. In the words of the Communication Manager (CM) at Asics Europe, "Asics, if you compare to Nike and Adidas, today, they (Asics Headquarters) are still very much product-driven instead of marketing-driven, that's what we saw our competitors starting already quite some years ago, if not ten or fifteen years ago" (personal communication, 15 July 2010). Consequently, the revival of Onitsuka Tiger marked a turning point in the parent-subsidiary relationship because its popularity, driven by Western consumption for fashion and lifestyle, pragmatically contradicted the corporate traditions of the Japanese headquarters which focused on the functionality of athletic and sporting products (Kobayashi et al., 2010).

Within this context of branding Onitsuka Tiger, Europe Asics and Amsterdam Worldwide have played a central role not only in constructing its advertising materials for the European markets but also in formulating its global advertising strategy and branding as a whole.<sup>7</sup> In 2007, Asics Europe launched a pivotal campaign called *Made*

*of Japan* featuring a sneaker-shaped diorama as a central promotional object. It articulated Onitsuka Tiger as an athletic shoe brand—using the logo, ‘Tiger stripes’—with some elements of Japanese culture. The first campaign produced was a relatively small-scale initiative, primarily developed for the European markets, featuring a print advertisement of the diorama designed and decorated with Japanese small, retro toys and collectibles. The 2008 campaign was then promoted globally, featuring another sneaker-shaped diorama, called ‘Electric Tiger Land’, that represented Tokyo’s urban cityscape at night with neon signs, trains and highways. The themes and ideas of the 2007 and 2008 campaigns were autonomously developed by Asics Europe and Amsterdam Worldwide.

Nevertheless, as *Made of Japan* was positioned and established as a more global campaign, there were growing tensions in the selection of themes and the development of ideas between the European creative workers and Asics Headquarters in Japan. Since 2009, Asics Headquarters has been involved in the production of *Made of Japan* campaigns mainly by: (a) coordinating a global meeting where representatives from Asics Headquarters and its overseas subsidiaries discuss potential themes and ideas for campaigns; and (b) approving or disapproving proposed themes, ideas and strategies. Although the production was still led by Asics Europe and Amsterdam Worldwide during the course of brand development for Onitsuka Tiger, the involvement by the Japanese headquarters made the production process much longer and more complicated. As the Creative Director (CD) at Amsterdam Worldwide elaborates on his position in alliance with Asics Europe:

...from an agency point of view, part of the challenge is articulating the ideas at an early stage. ...I think between us as an agency and [Asics Europe], you know it’s a pretty small team... So, I think we have quite an open relationship about how we can present stuff to you, how you can understand it and kind of see where we’re gonna go with it and we can explain very openly what our worries about it are, our concerns and things like that. So, that’s easy. But then, to get to a point where America is on board, Japan is on board, Australia is on board and all the other markets

are on board, that's quite difficult because we have to be very careful on how you sell the idea, how you sort of articulate it..., and you have to make sure that the work you propose ticks all the right boxes. That is a real challenge, every year. (personal communication, 15 July 2010)

Through such intense negotiations with Asics Headquarters and its overseas subsidiaries around the world, the *Made of Japan* campaigns continued to be central to Onitsuka Tiger's global branding in 2009 with a theme of the Zodiac; and in 2010 with a theme of *tansu*, which is a traditional chest of drawers. Thus, as illuminated by the multiple perspectives of the creative workers involved, the development of Onitsuka Tiger's branding offers insight into a process of self-Orientalization through which a 'Japanese' brand accepts, embraces and accommodates—often through negotiation—'European' representations of its 'country-of-origin' culture and identity within the context of advertising production. To explore the dynamics of internal strategic communication and negotiation between Japanese and European creative workers, the next section examines a specific context of production of Japanese authenticity through the 2010 *Made of Japan* campaign.

### *Resisting Orientalism by representing Japanese authenticity*

One of the aims for Asics Headquarters with respect to communicating with its European partners was to ensure that Japanese authenticity of the brand was properly conveyed. Since authenticity has become a key cultural code in the 'cluttered' landscape of advertising (Goldman and Papson, 1996), Japanese authenticity provides a focal point of brand differentiation for Asics when competing against Western brands. Recognizing the sensibility of the Japanese brand representing its authenticity, Asics Europe and Amsterdam Worldwide tried to differentiate their approach from the Western brands that also incorporated signs of Japanese culture for their products and advertisements. As such, they adopted a rather critical stance towards the apparent, overtly Orientalist, use of Japanese cultural elements by Western fashion brands such as

Superdry. According to the CD at Amsterdam Worldwide, “they have a lot of these little Japanese characters in their logos. They are very outspokenly kind of Japanese” (personal communication, 15 July 2010). The problem with Superdry’s use of Japanese characters was unmistakable given that the words were often misspelt or made no sense from a Japanese perspective, thereby clearly showing a lack of effort to understand the Other.

Hence, the European creative workers consciously attempted to avoid falling into an Orientalist approach as a means to differentiate the Onitsuka Tiger brand from rival Western brands:

CD (at Amsterdam Worldwide): That was a very conscious decision that we made very early on together where, I remember, we made two image boards like “This is Onitsuka Tiger” and “This isn’t Onitsuka Tiger”, “This is Japan” and “This isn’t Japan”. So, on the “NOT Onitsuka Tiger” board was, yeah, *manga*, *sumō* wrestlers, you know?... *Geisha*, and all of those can-be-pop types of things.

CM (at Asics Europe): Which is interesting. But, we felt we don’t want to communicate Onitsuka Tiger being that because that’s obviously expected. But, we want to share the values that are important for Japanese or important for the country. ...we try to investigate that through our Japanese connections. (personal communication, 15 July 2010)

Thus, their ‘Japanese connections’ served as important sources of Japanese authenticity and therefore legitimized the European advertising agency’s representations of Japanese culture and identity on behalf of the Japanese headquarters.

The most emblematic of the *Made of Japan* campaigns in terms of Japanese authenticity was the 2010 campaign which was developed with a sneaker-shaped *tansu* - a Japanese chest of drawers made of paulownia (see Figure 1).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Figure 1: An Advertising Image from the 2010 *Made of Japan* Campaign © Asics Corporation (reprinted with courtesy of Asics)



As such, the campaign is a good example of Goldman and Papson's (1996) contention that "[a]uthentic production has long been associated with craft production" (149). The aim of Asics Europe and Amsterdam Worldwide was to represent the Japanese craftsmanship of cabinetry by collaborating with Ogura Tansu Ten, a renowned paulownia *tansu* maker with over two hundred years of tradition in Kamo, Niigata. The CM at Asics Europe emphasizes the importance for incorporating the 'authentic' views, skills and experiences from Japanese designers, suppliers and collaborators:

...for us being European, we do feel that we can trust more their findings and their perception and what they would suggest because they were born in Japan and they were raised as being Japanese... It was with the *tansu* shoe in the end how we made the decision comparing proposals from, let's say, an American, compared to the Japanese traditional *tansu* manufacturer. Where you do see pros and cons being maybe a less known company versus a very established designer, then you say "Okay, for us is the brand more relevant that we make sure that it comes also from the heart of Japan rather than being a well-known designer". (personal communication, 15 July 2010)

Nevertheless, a major challenge for the European subsidiary and advertising agency to collaborate with 'authentic' Japanese designers and manufacturers is the increased risk of miscommunication and misunderstanding due to geographical, cultural and linguistic gaps. For instance, there were significant linguistic and cultural gaps because no one at Ogura Tansu Ten spoke fluent English or knew about the business of advertising. As it was the first time for Ogura Tansu Ten, or perhaps any *tansu* producer, to craft a sneaker-shaped *tansu*, there was a high degree of uncertainty for both parties about how the finished product should look.

Another challenge for the European subsidiary and advertising agency was that they also needed to be aware of how their representations of 'authentic Japan' would be perceived in the Western markets. In other words, the authenticity of Japaneseness itself may not be attractive enough to Western consumers. In this light, the CD at Amsterdam Worldwide elaborates on the logic of branding through the three-step process:

One of the things we always ask ... is “what do we want people to think when they see it?” The first thing is Onitsuka Tiger because you see the stripes or you see the branding. The second thing is Japanese because it has to have that sense, that aura about it... And thirdly, we want to tell a story which is relative specifically to that particular concept. So, you know, with *tansu* as an example again, the first thing you see ... is a profile of a shoe, so you know it’s a shoe company with the stripes you recognise them. The second thing you see is this kind of cabinetry which for Western people you associate that style with Asia and Japan... And the third thing is you say “Wow, there are doors in there. It looks interesting and kind of intriguing, what’s going on in this craft?” because its images in this kind of wood shop environment is dark and something interesting going on. (personal communication, 15 July 2010)

Thus, Japanese authenticity had to be (re)constructed and (re)presented in a ‘cool’, ‘interesting’ or ‘entertaining’ way as a *necessary* function of branding in order to attract young Western consumers who have a desire to associate with distinctive signs for their fashion, lifestyle and identities. Consequently, the creative process highlights the ways in which self-Orientalization operated through multiple layers of mediation between the European and Japanese creative and cultural workers. In the next sub-section, we further illustrate that the process of self-Orientalization promotes personal-level identification of creative workers with the Other when they perform strategic communication for advertising production and distribution.

#### *Ambivalence in European creative workers’ representations of Japan*

As the European marketers worked with a Japanese brand to represent Japanese authenticity, they were compelled, as part of their professional responsibility, to put themselves in the position of Japanese people and their way of life, business, and communication. For the CM at Asics Europe in particular, her personal struggles, or negotiation, with her multiple identities were apparent between her personal background as a Dutch born and raised citizen, and her occupational role which required her to explain and ‘teach’ about Japanese authenticity to European colleagues and consumers on behalf of a Japanese corporation.

The ambivalence between the ‘private’ (e.g. personal background) and ‘public’ (e.g. occupational role) identities of the European creative workers was clearly evident during our interviews. Hence, their sense of the Self and the Other often interchanged according to how they represented themselves, for instance, as Westerners, Europeans, Dutch, British or Japanese. More specifically, when they talked from the standpoint of Asics Europe or Amsterdam Worldwide, these organizations were referred to as ‘us’ in contrast to Asics Headquarters in particular, and the Japanese in general, as ‘them’. Moreover, their cultural and educational backgrounds were clearly one of the most influential factors in shaping their interpretations and imaginings of Japan as the West’s Other.

For instance, the ‘British’ or ‘English’ CD at Amsterdam Worldwide was reflexively aware of the influences of the (techno-)Orientalist discourse of Japan that is represented through Western media:

I’m speaking from a point of view of an English person... All the associations come from, for my generation that’s from the 80’s when, you know, all the cool digital watches, electronic gizmos, keyboards, computer games, Nintendos and all that stuff, and that’s Japan. So, when I was growing up, it’s always this kind of far-off distant country that was making cool things that I didn’t really understand... So, you get a kind of very funnelled view of Japan, a very sort of focused view which doesn’t represent Japan at all, really. But what you see through the media, through TV and to some extent through the internet, is quite particular. (personal communication, 15 July 2010)

In other words, the CD himself had been an active consumer of particular Otherness of Japan as promoted by the Western media throughout his own life (Soar, 2000). However, given that the European subsidiary and advertising agency were responsible for translating Japanese language and culture for the European/Western markets, the occupational—or ‘public’—role of the workers in representing a Japanese brand required a certain degree of legitimacy for authentic representation by *performing* and *embodying* Japanese culture, sensibility and values.

Therefore, it was not surprising that when they talked from the standpoint of Onitsuka Tiger, the Japanese brand was referred to as ‘us’ as opposed to its competing, mostly Western, brands as ‘them’. This occupational performance as Japanese is clearly embraced and manifested in the comment below by the CM at Asics Europe:

Onitsuka Tiger is ... really the authentic Japanese sport fashion brand. Where we want to communicate through products and ideally through everything we do, the Japanese heritage... It can also be new executions but still respecting our Japanese heritage, customs or craftsmanship, the way things are produced. And that should also differentiate our product offer in the market but also our communication. So, *we want to show that we are Japanese*. We don’t want to shout it out loud but follow the way that, we feel, fits the Japanese personality... Japaneseness for the Asics company represents that you don’t scream that you are a great brand. But you are modest about it. (personal communication, 15 July 2010, emphasis added)

The Japanese personality that she emphasises and embodies here refers specifically to modesty, honesty and humbleness that speaks less about itself in marketing and advertising (Kobayashi et al., 2010). Similarly, the CD at Amsterdam Worldwide highlights the importance of honesty in representing Japanese culture by acknowledging its hybrid nature:

...you can’t look at Japanese culture without accepting there’s a lot of influences from different parts. I think that’s part of the honest and humble kind of approach to Japaneseness that Onitsuka Tiger portrays because if we were to say “No, *sumi* (monochrome painting), that’s Japanese” or “No, the Zodiac is Japanese”, you know, that is not honest. That sort of honesty proves that we kind of know what Japaneseness is or Onitsuka Tiger knows what Japaneseness is. It would come across as foolish for Onitsuka Tiger to say this is Japanese without acknowledging where it came from because that proves knowledge of your history, your roots and your heritage. And to prove your knowledge of heritage proves your Japaneseness, I think. (personal communication, 15 July 2010)

Although he used different forms of the subject including ‘we’, ‘Onitsuka Tiger’ and ‘you’, this comment essentially argues for their legitimacy to represent Japaneseness based on their embodiment of Japanese values (e.g. honesty and modesty) and knowledge of Japanese heritage, culture and identity. As Nixon (2003) asserts, “the work-based identities of creative people were forged through social rituals and cultural

practices that were not narrowly work based, but spread into the domain of leisure and personal life” (167; see also Weeks, 2007). In other words, occupational identity is not completely separated from, but actually informed by, personal identity and vice versa. Thus, the consequence of in-depth engagement and identification with—and performance and embodiment of—Japanese culture is that the European creative workers consciously or unconsciously internalized some aspects of Japaneseness beyond occupational performances and relations. As Dirlik (1996) contends, a Western person “‘orientalised’ himself or herself in the very process of entering the ‘orient’ intellectually and sentimentally” (113). Consequently, it can be inferred that the dialectic function of Asics’ self-Orientalization promoted the Western/European representation—or ‘Westernization’—of a Japanese brand at a macro level on the one hand; and the ‘Japanization’ of occupational identity—and perhaps to a lesser degree personal identity—of the Western/European creative workers at a more micro level on the other hand. These dual effects of self-Orientalism are therefore worthwhile being investigated more closely by future research with respect to the blurring of the imaginary East-West division and the destabilization of Western hegemony.

## **Conclusion**

This paper explored and analyzed the process and practices of self-Orientalization within the transnational production of Asics’ *Made of Japan* advertising campaigns cutting across the East and the West. This process was prompted by the emerging popularity of the original models of Onitsuka Tiger sneakers and the response by Asics’ subsidiaries and advertising agencies in Europe. In turn, this emerging popularity eventually led to the revival of Onitsuka Tiger as a lifestyle brand and formalization of transnational, multifaceted communication strategies for the construction of global advertising campaigns. As the marketing managers at Asics

Headquarters explained, a series of changes to the management of a global brand was reinforced by two other facts: (a) that the sales within the Japanese market had been superseded by those of overseas markets; and, (b) that global advertising and branding required the ability to speak English as the *de facto* global language in the face of the cultural-economic realities of Western hegemony.

With insights from interviews with Japanese and European creative workers involved in the production of Onitsuka Tiger's *Made of Japan* campaigns, the analysis of the case study identified two fundamental mechanisms of self-Orientalism. The first mechanism of self-Orientalism is that it has a dialectic, and often ambiguous, effect on power relations between the West and the East/non-West. On one hand, self-Orientalization, via the creative alliance with Western advertising agencies, has arguably enabled Japanese corporations such as Asics to become 'transnational' and to act as a counter force to Western *economic* hegemony. As demonstrated, the revival of the Onitsuka Tiger brand initially prompted by European consumers brought tremendous opportunities for Asics to achieve economic gains in Western/global markets. On the other hand, self-Orientalization seems to be a less feasible strategic tool to counter Western *cultural* hegemony given that the Japanese TNCs have to substantially delegate creative/cultural work to their Western partners for communication and representation of their own brand philosophies, values and identities at the global level. The second mechanism of self-Orientalism is that it confuses a sense of subject/Self and object/Other and therefore blurs who represents the Orient and for whom, or questions the degree of self-representation. This was particularly evident at the personal-level identification of the European creative workers with 'Japan' as the Self/Other. By embodying and performing Japaneseness through strategic communication and interactions with both Japanese and European colleagues/partners, the European creative workers attempted to enhance their

legitimacy of representation and apparently internalized some aspects of Japaneseness through occupational performances and relations—albeit the degree may have varied among individuals according to how much they were involved in such a process of identification.

In sum, the paper highlighted the complexity of power relations, cultural identifications and negotiation between the East and the West as manifested through the creative alliance—in a form of self-Orientalization—within the context of global advertising production. Although the dominance of Western corporations and advertising agencies within the global economy and markets seems unlikely to be changed in the near future, it is important to note that Japanese—and other non-Western—creative workers are proactive in negotiating Orientalism—especially when they speak about their own culture and identity. Given the increasingly complex nature of the global division and interaction of creative/cultural labour (Cronin, 2004), future research will benefit from further understanding of the ways in which: (a) stereotypes of the Orient are re-shaped or trans-coded through different modes of creative alliance between the Orient and the Occident; and, (b) micro-level struggles and negotiation among creative workers in claiming ‘authenticity’ of their representations are manifested within the context of cultural production across the East and the West.

## Note

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<sup>1</sup> According to Hall (1992), “[b]y ‘western’ we mean the type of society discussed in this sense: a society that is developed, industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, secular, and modern” (277).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Samsung (Korean TNC) has worked with Western advertising agencies including Leo Burnett (USA), 72andSunny (USA) and Bartle Bogle Hegarty (UK). Asus (Taiwanese TNC) and Haier (Chinese TNC) have worked with J. Walter Thompson (USA).

<sup>3</sup> While it is not the focus of this study, it is important to acknowledge that the Japanese media and advertising industries are not benign in their practice of representing the Others or Occidentalism (for example, see Prieler, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> The discourse of techno-Orientalism has coincided with, and been complemented by, Japan’s own ‘techno-nationalism’ that has been embodied and represented particularly by Japanese TNCs (Kogure, 2008). For more examples of ‘Cool Japan’ and related stereotypes, see Condry (2009), Dailot-Bul (2007), and Iwabuchi (2002, 2008).

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<sup>5</sup> It is noteworthy that the motive and operation of self-Orientalization resemble those of 'internal' colonialism or colonization as they both involve the internalization of the Occident's or colonizers' tastes, beliefs and cultures (see Hartley, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> It is acknowledged that in order to reveal the full scale of 'day-to-day' negotiations in the campaign formulation, an ethnographic approach is more suited than post-production interviews (see Moeran, 1996a, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the creative workers for the *Made of Japan* campaign were considered as shapers of Japanese popular culture as emerging cultural capital (see Kobayashi et al., 2017 for re-conceptualization of cultural intermediaries)

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